

Resonating with Postmodern Community Empowerment and Localization Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

For more than two centuries now, the globalized mainstream economy has ruled the world. Realities and studies reveal that despite unprecedented wealth creation of the global economic system and the pledge of 189 country signatories in the Millennium Development Declaration to eradicate poverty, inequities and hunger prevail particularly in developing nations.

As offshoot of the failure of the mainstream system to trickle down progress and equity, the grassroots, advocacy groups, development practitioners and scholars have been pursuing deliberate actions in line with paradigms such as localization, community economic development and direct social well-being. The aim is to spur responsive and sustainable development from below.

Keywords : community empowerment, localization, community economic development, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

In 2000, 189 countries signed a declaration globally known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The eradication of extreme poverty by 2015 is among the MDGs' top priorities. Its realization was premised on the participation of every member of the society and on the shared responsibility of the signatory nations.

With just three years left in the MDGs timetable, the United Nations convened the Conference on Sustainable Development in June 2012. This Brazil gathering called the Rio+20 was attended by world leaders and private sector delegates who once again recognized the prevalence of poverty especially in poor countries and the inequitable wealth accumulation and control of the world's resources and advanced technology by the western societies. In response to these problems and in

congruence with the MDGs, the Rio+20 came up with proposals called the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among the prevailing thinking in the Rio+20 was the emphasis on localized efforts and effecting direct social well-being of the people in developing societies.

Chronic Poverty and Underdevelopment in Communities

Poverty problems in developing nations persist despite the heavy inflows of development interventions. A recent research on the community economics of Angono, Binangonan and Cardona or ABC Municipalities in the Rizal Province (Vital, Yap, Manimtim, Maslang, Sta. Maria, and Delas Armas, Jr., 2010) shows how the local economies there are being undermined by uncontrolled market values, influences of the “let it be” economic orientation, lack of common concern, and indifference of the locals.

The study revealed that saturation in the local economies of the three municipalities exists due to the numerous microenterprises individually owned and operated by the enterprising poor. Duplication of businesses is a common practice. Excessive microlending is done by banks, private agencies, government lending programs, and individuals. All these result to stiff competition among the microenterprises which had tightened further the business spaces and led to declining income. The local microbusiness operators mind the survival of their own businesses and the owners of the few bigger companies who are not from the localities are unmindful of the plight of the residents, the environment, and the poor state of community services. The people prefer to go for shopping and recreation in the big malls and commercial places outside the municipalities. Although there is local fish production, other prime needs like rice, vegetables, school supplies and clothes are either bought from external traders or from shops outside ABC. The children are sent to schools in the big cities like Manila. When the children finish college, they look for jobs somewhere else outside the municipalities, preferably overseas. Despite the presence of people-owned and operated water cooperatives in one of the localities, the people observed conflicting policies of the local authorities when the entry of a big corporate competitor was allowed. The members were afraid that their water cooperatives which have been providing them jobs and serving

the community for many years shall eventually be overpowered by the corporate competitor.

The study likewise bared the lack of compulsion from the local people to boost local production. The bigger business outfits which are largely commercial and light manufacturing are done by external investors and traders. Labor force participation continue to decline due to lack of value-adding ventures to support local agriculture. Added to this, crimes against property have been increasing over the years. The proliferation of informal settlers and lopsided tax distributions were likewise pointed as problematic areas. The residents of the coastal *barangays* pointed out the negative effects of poor waste management on the local economic activities while those in the upland areas complained about the continuing loss of vegetation. Since water and land resources comprise the fundamental economic base of the municipalities, food security and income of the residents are affected. As income levels are low and jobs hard to find, survival through whatever means had become the local people's top concern.

The situation in the ABC municipalities mirrors the complexities in the local socio-economic condition of many other Philippine localities. Ward and Lewis (2002) call it a 'collective action problem' resulting from actions of individuals which add up to a chaotic and undesirable system prevailing in the locality. As summed up by Vital, et. al. (2010), *the situation (in the ABC municipalities) is far too complex to be left to market forces alone, and to continually leave its fate to laissez-faire is tantamount to negligence and irresponsibility.*

Globalization or Localization?

The 2011 report of the United Nations Development Program noted that the continued intensification of social inequities and environmental degradation affecting mostly the least developed countries are real threats to whatever gains had been achieved by the MDGs (UNDP, 2011). Other observers such as Garlock (2015), Bello (2001) and Craig (2003) paint a grimmer picture of the effects of the globalized mainstream economic order. Garlock noted the inability of the weaker countries' products

to contend with much lower priced foreign goods and with the readily accessible better skilled workforce elsewhere in the world. He said that liberalized world production and trade proved favorable to developed economies but not to their developing country 'partners' where small enterprises and low-skilled and unskilled labor continue to suffer from further marginalization. For Craig, globalization is not a globalization of development but it is no more no less a globalization of capitalism, and that the trickle-down development programs and structural adjustments done by governments heightened instead of reduced relative poverty, poor literacy and health. Hence bottom-up community participation strategies had to be effected as a way to reverse such trend.

The beginning of the 21st century as noted by Bello, witnessed the full-blown crisis of legitimacy that confronted global capitalism with increasing number of people that no longer saw the credibility of its key institutions. Consequently, much questioning of and social resistance to corporate-driven globalization began to consolidate into advocacies for local community building founded on fundamental interests and values for articulation and protection of national and local interests. The object of the rethinking initiatives is to create wider latitude and novel lens for looking at the complex, multi-level and multi-dimensional local realities and from there, develop suitable framework for localized, bottom-up socio-economic actions for betterment.

Gibson-Graham (2014) note that the people in marginalized communities are also questioning how their social and environmental ills are being explained by existing economic theories and whether there really is a solution offered by the mainstream economy. The questioning of the traditional systems resulted to advocacy of new development paradigms and economic thinking such as community economics or community economic development, social economy, solidarity economy, intentional communities, and direct social well-being.

Norberg-Hodge who for thirty years had been promoting "new economics" argued in her award-winning work *The Economics of Happiness* that the most urgent issue is fundamental change to the economy and that change is the shifting away from globalizing to localizing economic

activities. Along this line, Ward and Lewis (2002) put forward their “leaky local economy” constructs, attributing the chronic underdevelopment and stagnation of localities to certain defects and “leaks” in their local systems and structures. Ward and Lewis argued that no matter how much resources, investments and interventions are poured into those localities, there is very little chance that those interventions shall work in favor of local development. Such is bound to happen when the structures, business activities, spending habits, mindsets and way of life of the people there do not support local growth and community welfare.

The “plugging the leak” strategy requires having the local productive capacity boosted by creating more channels and opportunities within the area. This includes local savings and investments in local production or value-adding activities, and having local enterprises that shall offer services and goods for which the people shall re-spend or use their money. The local people’s wider control or ownership of local production of goods, energy and other services through cooperatives and other forms of social entrepreneurship shall ensure stronger presence of local enterprises. Increased re-circulation of local people’s money within their communities, according to Ward and Lewis (2002), boosts their economic activities and in turn provides them employment and other sources of income. The leak-plugging strategies, per experiences of groups such as the *New Economics Foundation*, may take different forms and involve both internal and external actors depending on the situation. But all of them need deliberate actions which are defined by the local people themselves. They likewise demand conducive environment and legal frameworks that support the local efforts and encourage linkages and exchanges between and among villages and municipalities, and later between regions, when they shall prove to be more synergistic and parsimonious for the localities (Ward and Lewis, 2002, pp. 3-7).

The localization strategies, according to their proponents like Gibson-Graham (2014), need a new representation of the community economy and consistent ethical actions which recognize the diversity and innovations that are already existing and making them work in consonance with desired changes. The multisided attention shall cover not just the livelihood of the people but also their mindsets and awareness of their

transformative potentials, their way of life and power to push for reforms in the local structures and policies. According to Gibson-Graham, the calls for a new view of the economic realities have induced--

a groundswell of feeling that our economic theories, management practices and projection tools are insufficient to the task at hand. While the global economy shudders under the weight of financial crises and climate uncertainty, economic orthodoxy holds to the view that economies can grow their way out of danger. But economic growth, with its uneven geography and voracious appetite for earth's resources, is undermining the likelihood of a peaceful and sustainable future. On the ground as people go about their day to day lives in places around the world there is a questioning of mainstream economic growth as the panacea for all social and environmental ills...(2014).

Promoting Direct Social Well-Being

The advocacy for community-focused development efforts and direct social well-being has gained increased following over the years (Weil, 2011). The common strand that ties the ideals and efforts of the local development advocates is their frustration from the mainstream economic theory and practice, and their passion for effecting fundamental changes which the advocates believe cannot be realized with just relying on the big market-oriented system.

An “ecumenical approach” that openly puts into consideration as many as there are practices into the conceptual framework is proposed by Gibson-Graham (2014). This is in contrast with the mainstream way of ignoring other parts of realities and just taking into account certain factors like GNPs and GDPs and relationships such as labor and capital. The author proposes a conceptualization and practice of a more diverse community economies which is open to other motivating forces and non-mainstream practices. Here, a much wider range of social relations such as trust, care, sharing, reciprocity, cooperation, divestiture, future orientation, collective agreement, thrift, guilt, love, community pressure, equity, self-exploitation, solidarity, distributive justice, stewardship, spiritual

connection, and environmental and social justice are expected to bear on economic practices.

As the trend to go local gains momentum, Weil (2011) reminds its advocates and practitioners about the necessity of opening their eyes to other realities. Localization for Weil is not a “cure all” and isolationist solution. It is open to interaction with the world outside the locality such as through fair trade, organic, sustainable, diverse, plant-based farming as meaningful alternatives that shift the economics of agriculture away from exploitation and abuse without closing the economic interactions with external partners, between north and south, east and west, or between developing and developed economies.

Gibson-Graham and Roelvink (2011) used the diverse economic framework in the inventory of two municipalities in the Philippines, one of them was Linamon in Lanao Del Norte. Linamon is a fifth class municipality with 17,000 inhabitants. The inventory did away with the traditional approach of including only the micro and small businesses when looking at the “economic assets” and planning for local economic development. It focused on the wide range of engagements by the local people to provide for their daily needs and well-being. As part of local capacity building, local people coming from different *barangays* of Linamon were trained and actively involved as researchers who compiled an inventory of the economy of the municipality, under the guidance of external researchers from the academics. Qualitatively, the team uncovered the richness of the activities and practices in the localities, and covered both the market and non-market transactions and relationships prevailing among the locals.

With regard the market transactions both in the typical and alternative marketplaces, the Linamon inventory covered among others the practices in goods and service exchanges, the kinds of goods and services that flow in and out the localities, the goods that are exchanged in non-traditional and cooperative channels, the power relationships, if any, between buyers and sellers, and the ethics that govern such relationships. For the non-market transactions, the research included household level activities such as food sharing, child and house care sharing, animal raising, free labor exchanges, neighborhood mutual assistance, sharing of money

and labor for weddings, celebrations and church donations, remittances of relatives working overseas, and other sources of food or money such as collecting leftovers and whatever vegetables or fruits are there after harvest.

The exercise enabled both the local people and their partners to identify practices which traditional paradigm tends to categorize as backward and unproductive. Rather than leaving them out, they were considered potential strengths which could serve as starting points for planning and implementing local actions for direct social well-being. The inventory team reports:

The stories that had been told...disclosed many potential ways to fund community economic development in addition to export orientated production and micro-credit schemes so often pushed by mainstream development bodies. The transactions inventory highlighted, for example, remittances gifted by overseas contract migrants that are used by households to fund the necessities of everyday life and sometimes to purchase more luxury items. Stories were also told of migrants using their remittance earnings to fund local *barangay* improvements. Local roads and water systems had been built by harnessing volunteer labor (modeled on the time honored performance of *bayanihan*, or local civic effort) and materials bought with gifted remittances. The inventory prompted discussion about whether existing sources of finance and practices of giving and reciprocity might be enlisted to support other community-orientated development projects (2011).

Taking a new view of community realities enables the people and their supporters to also put new values on voluntary work, people's practices and local resources. Voluntary labor is vital in undertaking community empowerment projects that could be developed into value-generating and value-adding ventures. This community-level development approach for direct well-being is fundamentally different from the trickle down mainstream economic development strategy. The latter has been proven by time to have just widened the gap between the rich and the

poor, to have promoted wealth concentration in the hands of a few and impoverishment of more and more people particularly in poor countries. Gibson-Graham and Roelvink (2011) termed the direct social well-being approach as “percolate-up” in contrast to the “trickle-down” of the traditional system. Percolate-up approach opens a lot of possibilities for building local capacities by engaging people in concrete actions. For example, the undesirable trends in the local economies of the ABC municipalities in Rizal may be addressed by optimized participation of the local people in productive activities using the rich natural resources, and in complementation with existing livelihood like fishing, livestock, bamboo crafts, weaving, and other handicrafts. Fish production and value-adding by the locals may be strengthened by having them pool more capital through cooperatives coupled with stricter regulation on the issuance of permits, size of fish pens, use of feeds, and pollution (Vital, et.al., 2010).

Localized group actions are catalyzed with the interrelated efforts on consciousness-raising, building structures and making people act on their felt needs. These processes are essential to community empowerment. They increase the actors’ confidence in collective and interdependent strategies as well as their chances to succeed in future actions. Joint action rather than individual activities promotes participants’ mutual concern and sense of common ownership of the gains of their initiatives. Such processes draw from Freire’s *praxis* theory which expounds on building people’s critical awareness of their objective realities and potent power as they engage in the liberating process of action-reflection-action. Freire theorized that critical awareness of the situation shall lead to questioning and taking positive action toward changing such situation.

The conscious and continuous process of doing things together, reflecting on what was done and drawing lessons from experiences is a powerful educative exercise for empowering people in their decision making, planning, mobilizing and networking with support groups. Local actions are done on the basis of the local people’s readiness to act on their felt needs. These courses of actions and outcomes are also considered part of social capital building. Social capital is an essential component of community building in view of the complexities of the local problems. OECD Insights defines social capital *as the links, shared values*

and understandings in society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and so work together (2007, p. 102). Many other types of “capital”, assets and resources can be found in the localities. The local people and their supporters just need to know how to piece them together to build their communities (Shaffer, 1989).

SUMMARY

The continued failure of the mainstream economy to trickle-down to the greater majority of marginalized sections of society the abundant wealth it had been creating for the past two centuries compelled the people at the grassroots levels together with allied development theorists and practitioners to seek for alternatives. With great optimism and trust, a re-examination and reframing of local development theories and practices in the face of the persistent and aggravating socio-economic problems had been undertaken and are actually gaining momentum in many parts of the world.

Many community-based groups in the Philippines have likewise assumed responsibilities for their own empowerment initiatives. Effectiveness in such efforts draws from paradigms like direct well-being production and community economic development. These localization paradigms direct the initiatives of development actors to more optimized use of local resources, plugging the leaks in local economies to prevent depletion of the wealth created by the community, putting new values to the non-economic activities and attributes of the localities, and empowering the local people to act on their own problems and needs. These are considered essential building blocks for enabling community economies and environments to provide for the people’s direct well-being and holistic development.

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